



Chapter X

ICT and Local Governance: A View from the South

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*Argentina is slowly walking along the path of ICT uses for social and civic purposes. Local governments and community organisations are understanding the potential advantages of Community Informatics, and facing a myriad of prejudices and material obstacles to implement it. This chapter shows the first results of a three-year research on the subject of information technology, local governance, and community networks in the City of Buenos Aires. It deals with two intimately interrelated issues: a) **Local government's use of ICT for local management and communication with citizens: results and obstacles.** The government is opening slowly to the use of ICT to decentralise urban functions, increase the flow of horizontal institutional information, update urban management, inform the citizens, and increase public participation in urban affairs. However, prejudices, fear of technology, and above all a resilient institutional culture are still considerable obstacles for informatization. The paper surveys the technological changes implemented by the Government of Buenos Aires City and studies the social actors who were responsible for them, as well as the social processes that made them possible, as a necessary framework to understand the slow development of electronic community networks. b) **Emerging Electronic Community Networks.** From 1997 onwards, they have multiplied in various sectors: education, culture, community health and wellness, citizens' rights, participation in urban affairs. The chapter studies the local particularities of community, focusing on the differences between large and small community organisations, and their conceptions of time and space, linked to the use of on-line resources. It finishes by analysing the link between the local governmental context referring the use of ICT and the slow emergence of electronic community networks.*

Introduction

Citizens, politicians and researchers have been searching for answers to the defies and new social processes which emerge at the end of the millennium, characterised by three main trends: informatization, urbanisation and globalisation (Castells, 1998). In Latin American cities, these global processes have had many adverse effects: urban fragmentation, increasing unemployment, poverty, socio-spatial dualisation, severe cuts in social services, higher costs in urban infrastructures and services generated by their privatisation and difficulties of local governments to manage the increasingly complex cities and to satisfy the populations demands. One of the possible answers that local governments are beginning to implement is precisely the use of informatics to increase the efficacy of institutional management, to collect the demands of the population, and to obtain political consensus.

On the other hand, there are social movements, community organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), citizens, briefly, a set of social agents who constitute civil society, which are implementing alternatives to create alternative action spaces, and searching for solutions to the local problems triggered by global processes. These social agents are also beginning to use informatics to create local and international networks, get strength through the dissemination of their actions, access to international funding sources and exert pressures over national and local governments.

These processes do not evolve without severe difficulties. Organisational inertia, resistance to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), scarce access by the population to ICTs, inadequate policies carried on by telecommunication enterprises, translated into high Internet and telephone costs, contribute to make slow and painful progress along this path. However, some of the existing social agents assume new roles: progressive sectors of local governments and the more active members of the largest community organisations find a common ground in claiming a broader citizens' participation using electronic communication.

A set of questions emerges when working on the subject of Community Informatics in Latin America: How are information and communication technologies transforming urban life quality in a developing country? How are technological decisions related to the local political context? How is information technology used in communication between urban managers and citizens? Which are the factors that facilitate or inhibit the implementation of ICTs in the cities? How do community networks emerge in this context? This chapter tries to answer these questions, by contributing to the understanding of the potential advantages of Community Informatics in Argentina, and the prejudices and material obstacles it faces. It shows the first results of a three-year research on the subject of information technology, local governance, and community networks, coordinated by the author.

This research, "New Paradigms in Citizens' Participation Through Information Technologies" (1997-1999), carried on at the Gino Germani Research Institute, University of Buenos Aires, was based mainly on field work. It included documental study, close direct observation of the work of civil servants and community organisations, interviews with national and international organisation consultants,

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